

By 1870, "Mrs. Brown" (a famous imaginary character) reported that "of all the wonderful places as ever I see the Polytechnic beats 'em all, for it's a factory and a peep-show and all manner put together".

By this time, complex visual shows and "grand optical pantomimes", like the Polytechnic's *Aladdin* (see monitor), had become a Christmas staple. Other visual attractions followed:



Aladdin images courtesy of the Lester Smith Collection



The projection kaleidoscope



The projection phenakistoscope



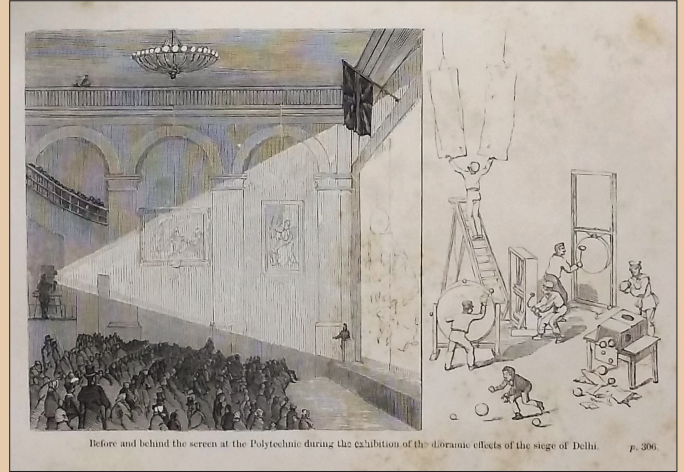
The lantern polariscope



The "photodrome"



The illuminated cascade



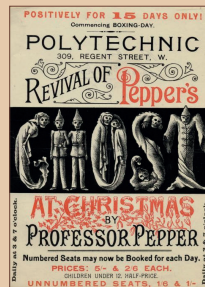
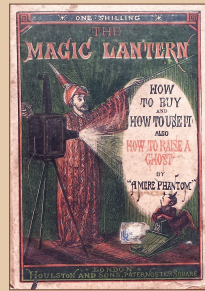
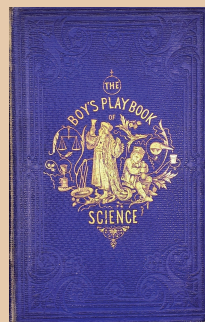
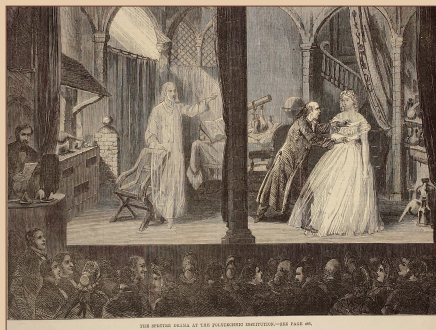
Before and behind the screen at the Polytechnic during the exhibition of the dramatic effects of the siege of Delhi p. 306

The name most associated with the Royal Polytechnic is "Professor" John Henry Pepper. He gave his first lecture in 1847, and joined the staff as Lecturer and Analytical Chemist the next year. In 1854, when still in his early thirties, he became Director, arranging the Institution's programmes and even personally guaranteeing its financial success. The rent was £2,480—a fortune in the 1850s (when £300 a year was enough to keep a middle-class family respectable)—so he cannot be blamed for keeping a showman's eye on the main chance.

Pepper was a fair scientist, and a brilliant teacher-populariser—with a voice "clear, far reaching and of a kind that commanded attention" (wrote the Polytechnic lantern artist E.H. Wilkie), and a gift for making complexities clear. His books, like *The Boys' Playbook of Science* (which lives up to its title) encouraged young and old to visit the Polytechnic.

It was in 1862, during his second period as Director, that Pepper introduced the edu-tainment for which he is best remembered. "The Ghost" was based on an invention by Henry Dircks; Pepper modified it for simpler theatrical presentation (see cabinet to left). The "effect" on an "illustrious" trial audience of "literary and scientific friends" proved (gratifyingly) "startling in the extreme!"

## Under Pepper, the "Institution" became an "institution" of London life.



Pepper left the Polytechnic in 1872. Without him, it became first tired, then dated, and it folded in September 1881. Pepper's last presentations of "The Ghost" occurred during a one-off return in 1889, in the same Polytechnic theatre (built 1848)—the first purpose-built projection space in the world, in the first multi-media complex for visual entertainment (and education)—but in an Institution now under the management of Quintin Hogg, founder of the Young Men's Christian Institute.



The Royal Polytechnic Hogg re-forged is still (as the University of Westminster) the largest provider of adult education in London, finally achieving the dream that spurred Sir George Cayley to found the Poly in 1838. Its theatre was the venue for the first screenings of "animated pictures"—Lumière films—seen in Britain, in 1896. It is still a cinema.



Jeremy Brooker's book *The Temple of Minerva: Magic and the Magic Lantern at the Royal Polytechnic Institution*, which inspired this exhibition, is one of a number of works on popular Victorian visual entertainments which have recently appeared from the hands of Mervyn Heard, Deac Rossell, and Erkki Huhtamo, to name just three. All rely and build on Richard D. Altick's remarkable book *The Shows of London* (1978). Agitate for its republication!